

## Effective Communication Skills

Effective communication is a necessary skill for families to cope with the ups and downs of a mental illness, because sometimes it's not **what** you say but **how** you say it that is important. Everyone can feel alienated by remarks that can be interpreted as blaming, belittling, accusing, or ridiculing. Developing effective communication skills means finding ways to express yourself and your needs in a clear and respectful manner.

### COMMUNICATION DO'S & DON'TS

#### DO...

- Be respectful
- Be straightforward and brief
- Stay calm
- Listen carefully
- Minimize other distractions (turn off the TV or radio)
- Acknowledge what is being said
- Stick to one topic at a time (the current issue, not an old one)
- Repeat questions or statements when necessary (do not rephrase the question in the hope that it will be clearer)
- Empathize (“that must be very difficult for you”)
- Use “I” messages to communicate your feelings
- Keep your statements brief; saying too much at a time makes it challenging to respond

#### DON'T...

- DON'T criticize
- DON'T argue about past events
- DON'T take anything personally
- DON'T interrupt
- AVOID name-calling
- AVOID being judgemental
- DON'T tease your family member about their symptoms
- DON'T raise your voice; yelling or shouting will never help you communicate your thoughts
- DON'T generalize—be specific; words like ‘always’ or ‘never’ are loaded and unhelpful (for example: “You never lift a finger around here”)
- AVOID patronizing authoritative statements such as “You’re acting like a child” or “You’ll do as I say, young lady”

When communicating your needs, you want to be assertive. Being assertive allows you to act in your own best interests, while also considering the needs of others.

## Communication Skills

Communication is composed of two main skills: *listening* and *speaking*.

**LISTENING** is to:

**Listen** attentively to the words (verbal) and expressions (non-verbal)

**Involve** yourself—be interested in what is said

**Show respect**—treat adults as adults

**Take time** to reflect on what is said

**Empathize**—respect how others feel

**Never** accuse, blame, or belittle

**SPEAKING** is to:

**Share** your feelings honestly by using “I” messages

**Present** issues and concerns, not past

**Express** your thoughts and concerns, both negative and positive

**Acknowledge** the other person’s feelings

**Keep it simple** and clear

### “I” messages

One simple method of communicating your needs assertively is called the “**I message**” tool. The “**I message**” is a basic communication tool that can be used to make a request or express negative feelings.

The “I message” works like this:

***I feel*** \_\_\_\_\_ , ***when you*** \_\_\_\_\_ .

Some examples:

*I feel irritated, when you criticize me.*

*I feel relieved, when you take your medication.*

*I get scared, when you raise your voice.*

*I worry, when you come home late.*

## Expressing Negative Feelings

The situation that seems to challenge one's communication skills the most is when negative feelings need to be expressed. It can create additional anxiety and nervousness and cloud our best intentions to deliver the message in a clear and respectful manner.

The following are some tips to help you express negative feelings effectively:

- Express yourself when the problem behaviour occurs. Don't wait until later unless it is impossible to be reasonably calm and clear at the moment.
- State specifically, using "I" messages, what the other person has done or said that is producing the negative feeling in you.
- Tell the other person how their behaviour is affecting you by stating the feeling you are experiencing. Be direct and honest.
- Request a change in behaviour or ask the person to help you solve the problem by offering up an alternative solution.
- Look at the other person when you are expressing your negative feelings.
- Take note of your non-verbal language: leaning towards them or coming close makes the expression more direct and clear; have a serious expression on your face to match the seriousness of your discussion.
- Use a firm tone of voice consistent with the feelings you are expressing.

## Making Positive Requests

To make a positive request:

- Look at and lean toward the other person.
- Smile or have a pleasant facial expression.
- Use a warm tone of voice, accentuating positive feelings.
- Specify and clarify exactly what you would like the other person to do or say.
- Let them know how you would feel if your request was granted, accentuating positive feelings.

Topics that might be dealt with using positive requests include asking the ill person to:

- take medication regularly
- engage in a particular activity
- do a favour
- engage in conversation
- provide some help in solving a problem

## Communicating with a Person with a Mental Illness

People who have a mental illness have symptoms and characteristics that require adaptations in the way you communicate to increase your chances of being understood. The following table shows symptoms of mental illness and corresponding adaptations.

<b>Symptom or Characteristic</b>	<b>Adaptation</b>
Confusion about what is real	Be simple and straight forward
Difficulty in concentrating	Be brief; repeat
Overstimulation	Limit input; don't force discussion
Poor judgment	Don't expect rational discussion
Preoccupation with internal world	Get attention first
Agitation	Recognize agitation and allow the person an exit
Fluctuating emotions	Don't take words or actions personally
Fluctuating plans	Stick to one plan
Little empathy for others	Recognize as a symptom
Withdrawal	Initiate conversation
Belief in delusions	Don't argue
Fear	Stay calm
Insecurity	Be loving and accepting
Low self-esteem	Stay positive and respectful

iAdapted from: When Someone You Love Has a Mental Illness by Rebecca Woolis, MFCC, 1992

iiSource same as above

iiiSource same as above